

November 8, 2009 - Emotional Event near Shanksville Honors Flight 93 Heroes

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By Richard Robbins

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Christine Homer was walking down Sixth Avenue in New York City when she saw the World Trade Center collapse on Sept. 11, 2001. She had friends who worked in the complex of buildings at the southern tip of Manhattan.

In those first moments of national alarm, she had no way of knowing how fully and tragically she and her family would be swept up in the terrorist assault on the homeland.

By mid-afternoon, she knew. Her brother, LeRoy Homer, was the copilot on Flight 93 that crashed and burned in Stonycreek Township, Somerset County, after being hijacked by terrorists on a flight from Newark to San Francisco.

On Saturday, Homer and 10 relatives were on hand for the "ground turning" ceremony for a \$60 million national memorial to the 40 passengers and crew of Flight 93.

"It's been really emotional," Homer said of the ceremony attended by national and state leaders, including Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Gov. Ed Rendell, and some 30 family members of the fallen.

For Homer, one of the things that stands out most clearly in the intervening eight years has been the love and support extended the families by the people of Somerset County, especially the volunteers who have manned the Flight 93 temporary memorial. She called them "guardians" of her brother and the others.

The ceremony took place on a day that was as nearly clear as 9/11 itself, with a skirting of white clouds set against a pale blue sky. When the time came to put shovels to earth, Salazar repeated a phrase that became watchwords in the days following the attacks in New York City, at the Pentagon in northern Virginia and in the quiet countryside of rural Pennsylvania: "Let's roll!"

Flight 93 passenger Todd Beamer uttered those words moments before the passengers and crew rushed the cockpit, where one of the terrorists was in control of the plane. Their actions in all probability saved the White House or the Capitol from attack.

In paying homage to the passengers and crew, Rep. John Murtha, D-Johnstown, said, in a prepared statement, that "future generations will look across this quiet Pennsylvania field and forever be reminded of the story of Flight 93 and the courage and sacrifice of her passengers and crew."

Murtha and Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Hollidaysburg, were unable to attend the ceremony because of a pending vote in the House on health care

reform.

Rendell paid tribute to the "heroism of ordinary citizens." Sen. Bob Casey Jr. said yesterday's event "reaffirmed a commitment to complete the Flight 93 memorial" in timely fashion.

Officials expect to dedicate this first and most vital phase of the memorial on Sept. 11, 2011.

When completed, visitors will be able to approach the edge of the crash site but not enter what planners are calling the Sacred Ground. Set against a backdrop of hemlock trees that absorbed the impact of crash, this area will be planted in wildflowers that will bloom from spring through fall.

Designer Paul Murdock, on hand for the ceremony, said substantial work on the site will likely not get under way until the spring of 2010. That will leave a little over a year to get things in place. "It's a somewhat aggressive timetable but achievable," said Murdock of Los Angeles.

The \$60 million cost is being split evenly between the state and federal governments and private fundraising, spearheaded by the National Park Foundation. Some \$16 million in private money has been raised to date.

King Laughlin, the foundation's Flight 93 campaign manager, said the next two years will provide an important "window of opportunity" to raise the remainder of the money, after which the task might be more difficult.

Gordon Felt, president of Families of Flight 93, said it is "crucial people realize we are not done. We still need their help."

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